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**THESIS**

**AN ANALYSIS OF MENTORING TRAITS AND THEMES  
INFLUENTIAL IN THE RETENTION OF MINORITY  
STUDENTS AT THE UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY**

by

Demetrius Wilkins

June 2004

Thesis Co-Advisors:

Janice H. Laurence  
Gail Fann Thomas

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**MENTORING TRAITS AND THEMES INFLUENTIAL IN THE POTENTIAL  
RETENTION OF MINORITY STUDENTS AT THE UNITED STATES NAVAL  
ACADEMY**

Demetrius Wilkins  
Lieutenant, United States Navy  
B.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, May 1996

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June 2004**

Author: Demetrius Wilkins

Approved by: Janice H. Laurence  
Thesis Co-Advisor

Gail Fann Thomas  
Thesis Co-Advisor

Douglas A. Brook  
Dean  
Graduate School of Business and Public Policy

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study was designed to examine mentoring of minority midshipmen at the United States Naval Academy (USNA). Mentoring has long been practiced in the business world to introduce new employees to their new assignments, positions, or jobs. This study searched for the effects of mentoring on Black and White male midshipmen and examined the distinguishing features that make mentoring a positive experience for the mentor and protégé alike. Additionally, this study looked at the features of mentoring that may influence minority midshipmen to remain at the USNA and in the United States Navy as well. Focus groups with over 50 participants were conducted and content analyzed for reliable themes. Although there seems to be mistrust of faculty and staff, upperclassmen are an invaluable and sought after source of specific information. Further, minorities especially seek networks such as sports teams and “Black” clubs for support. In such homogeneous networks, minority midshipmen are less likely to feel vulnerable or inadequate when seeking information.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
A.	BACKGROUND .....	1
B.	PURPOSE.....	3
C.	METHODOLOGY .....	3
D.	ANALYSIS .....	4
E.	SCOPE, LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS .....	5
<b>II.</b>	<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>7</b>
A.	THE CONCEPT OF MENTORING .....	7
B.	THE FOUR PHASES OF MENTORING .....	8
C.	FORMAL AND INFORMAL MENTORING .....	9
D.	MINORITIES AND MENTORING .....	10
E.	PEER MENTORING .....	11
<b>III.</b>	<b>RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>13</b>
A.	INTRODUCTION.....	13
B.	STUDY DESCRIPTION .....	13
C.	PARTICIPANTS.....	13
D.	DESCRIPTION OF PROTOCOL .....	15
E.	DESCRIPTION OF QUESTIONNAIRE .....	15
F.	POTENTIAL BIASES.....	15
G.	FOCUS GROUP PROCEDURE .....	15
<b>IV.</b>	<b>ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>19</b>
A.	OVERVIEW .....	19
B.	THEME #1: MIDSHIPMEN ARE PRIMARILY INFLUENCED BY PARENTS, RELATIVES AND ACTIVE/RETIRED MILITARY TO ATTEND THE NAVAL ACADEMY .....	19
C.	THEME #2: FIRST CLASS (1/C) MIDSHIPMEN ARE THE STRONGEST MENTORING INFLUENCE ON OTHER MIDSHIPMEN.....	22
D.	THEME # 3: MIDSHIPMEN SEEM TO HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF SKEPTICISM WITH THE CHAIN OF COMMAND.....	25
E.	THEME # 4: BOTH MAJORITY AND MINORITY MIDSHIPMEN ESTABLISH MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS TO ACQUIRE VERY SPECIFIC INFORMATION.....	29
F.	THEME # 5: MINORITY MIDSHIPMAN USE A SYSTEM OF NETWORKS FOR SUPPORT .....	31
<b>V.</b>	<b>CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>37</b>
A.	CONCLUSIONS .....	37
B.	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	39

<b>APPENDIX A: MENTORING FOCUS GROUP SEMI-STRUCTURED PROTOCOL.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: MENTORING BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST .....</b>	<b>47</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	African-American Representation in Active Duty Naval Force as of Feb 2002. ....	2
Table 2.	Focus Group Methodology Strata Table.....	14
Table 3.	Focus Group Session Schedules and Site Location. ....	16

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This study was designed to examine mentoring of minority midshipmen at the United States Naval Academy (USNA). Mentoring has long been practiced in the business world to introduce new employees to their new assignments, positions, or jobs. This study searched for the effects of mentoring on Black and White male midshipmen, and examined the distinguishing features that make mentoring a positive experience for the mentor and protégé alike. Additionally, this study looked at the features of mentoring that may influence minority midshipmen to remain at the USNA and in the United States Navy as well. Focus groups with over 50 participants were conducted and content analyzed for reliable themes. Although there seems to be mistrust of faculty and staff, upperclassmen are an invaluable and sought after source of specific information. Further, minorities especially seek networks such as sports teams and “Black” clubs for support. In such homogeneous networks, minority midshipmen are less likely to feel vulnerable or inadequate when seeking information.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **A. BACKGROUND**

“Mentor” can be used to describe someone who is a friend, teacher, guide or coach. Throughout history, mentoring has played a critical function in the way people transfer information amongst one another. Generations, in fact, have passed knowledge from one to the next in this manner (Buhler, 1998).

The pairing of mentor with protégé has been known to ease the transition of a new employee into a new organization. A mentor acts to ease the “new person” into the organization and provide needed direction. Many nuances and small details concerning how to be successful within the organization can be passed down from the older, incumbent to the newcomer. Also, the pairing can open up other opportunities on both the social and professional fronts for the younger employee.

Mentoring has long been an important training and socialization tool of the civilian employment sector. It has received increasing attention in the job market in the last 20-25 years. Organizations have been known advocates of mentoring as a training tool to get new employees assimilated and familiarized with unique corporate norms and rules. Businesses have been known for pairing younger inexperienced employees with older, more experienced and knowledgeable employees.

Mentoring in the civilian sector is primarily used to help new employees adjust to the environment of a new company or organization. Mentors serve in the capacity of role models who can help younger employees with seeing the ‘bigger picture’ and even understanding the small nuances of a new organization. The practice of mentoring has applicability in the military sector also. In fact, mentoring has been used informally in the military for the same reason. Newly appointed personnel are assigned “running mates.” These “running mates” assist with the difficult adjustment of being at new command and help familiarize new personnel with command policies and procedures.

Mentoring may be a key element to promoting retention in the active duty forces. Using mentoring in the military may help to create an environment more conducive to retaining our best and brightest personnel. Retention in the services has been an issue of

note for the past 10-15 years in the United States Navy (USN). Retention of personnel is high on the USN's list of priorities (Wade, 1995). This is notably truer for minorities within the officer corps. While minority personnel are amply represented in the enlisted ranks, the same cannot be said for the officer ranks. As it stands, some 6.7 percent African American officers comprise the naval officer corps. African Americans comprise over 20 percent of the enlisted naval force (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

<b>African-American Representation in Active Duty Naval Force as of Feb 2002</b>			
	<b>TOTAL PERSONNEL</b>	<b>AFRICAN-AMERICAN PERSONNEL</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>
<b>OFFICER</b>	51,038	3,240	6.3
<b>WARRANT</b>	1,719	284	16.5
<b>OFFICER TOTAL</b>	52,757	3524	6.7
<b>ENLISTED</b>	310,284	62,974	20.3
<b>GRAND TOTALS</b>	363,041	66,498	18.3

African American enlisted personnel are nearly triple the amount of African American officers in the United States Navy. The sparse representation of minority officers in mid-grade and senior positions is of note (Wade, 1995). One potential consequence of such low representation is that it will be increasingly difficult to retain minority officers in the USN.

Effective mentoring strategies potentially can lead to higher retention levels throughout the fleet. Mentors and protégés usually see certain qualities within each other that bring them into the mentoring relationship. In the case of minority officers, the lack of mentors at higher ranks and levels of command in the military that “look like” or resemble them may be detrimental.

## **B. PURPOSE**

The objective of this thesis was to gather information on the unique mentoring experiences of midshipmen (midn) and to explore the differences between the mentoring experiences of minority (African-American) and majority (Caucasian) male midshipmen. This study uses a focus group methodology to gather in-depth data concerning the male midshipman mentoring experience. This is a departure from past research on mentoring at USNA, which elicited data through survey methodology (Baker, 1999). By exploring the mentoring experience here at the Naval Academy, this researcher hopes to understand the successful adjustment to the demands of this four-year officer preparation program. This research may be able surface the benefits of the mentoring experience and its contribution to officer education.

Topics addressed include:

- Are there any differences between minority and majority views and experiences concerning mentoring?
- Who typically serves in the mentor role for both minority and majority midshipmen?
- What specific needs, if any, need to be addressed for minority and majority midshipmen in the mentoring relationship?

## **C. METHODOLOGY**

The first formal step of this study consisted of a literature review of scholarly books and journal articles related to mentoring. This research consisted of a focus group methodology developed to examine the construct of mentoring. In addition, a questionnaire was used to gather background information (e.g., sports team participation, extra-curricular clubs and associations).

Specifically, a semi-structured focus group protocol was developed to pose general questions about mentoring experiences at USNA. Both the questionnaire and focus group protocol were reviewed and approved by USNA faculty and the Academy's Human Subjects Review Board in Institutional Research.

African American and Caucasian male midshipmen from year groups 2002-2005 comprised the sampling frame for this study. Potential study participants were asked via e-mail to participate in the mentoring study. Institutional Research and the Midshipman Activities Department assisted in contacting potential participants and helped to coordinate logistics for the project. Each focus group consisted of 4-8 male midshipmen and groups were homogenous with regard to class (4th Class (4/C)-freshman, 3rd Class (3/C)-sophomore, 2nd Class (2/C)-junior, 1st Class (1/C)-senior) and racial status. Focus groups were conducted with men only to avoid confounds of gender differences that were beyond the scope of this study. Additionally, 2/C and 1/C midshipmen were combined together into one “upperclass” group.

Over 50% of the minority male population at the USNA participated in this study. The minority male midshipman population of the Naval Academy was over-sampled, relative to majority midshipman, due to the small percentage of minority males within the Brigade of Midshipmen.

Participation was strictly voluntary and midshipmen in this study were randomly assigned (within class and race strata) to focus group sessions. To increase the reliability of focus group results, two focus groups were conducted within each study “cell” defined by race and year group strata (i.e., minority and majority males across three class groups (4/C, 3/C and Upperclass)).

#### **D. ANALYSIS**

Focus group sessions were recorded and notes were taken throughout the interviews. N-VIVO, qualitative data analysis software was used to develop themes analysis from the transcribed interviews.

Data analysis consisted of examining focus group results for relevant themes within and across strata. Responses were assessed in terms of how the mentoring experience influences the ultimate goal of midshipmen receiving a USNA commission and possible later implications for fleet retention. Additionally, the resulting themes were evaluated to determine positive and negative aspects of the mentoring relationship.

## **E. SCOPE, LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS**

The scope of this thesis includes: (1) a review of mentoring, (2) focus groups composed of midshipmen to answer probing questions and offer opinions about mentoring and the mentoring experience at the USNA, (3) and in-depth analysis of the focus group responses. The thesis was intended to examine the qualities of mentoring and potentially develop recommendations to improve mentoring efforts at the United States Naval Academy. Few studies exist that have investigated the mentoring experience at military academies. Prior studies have examined the aspect of mentoring using survey instruments. By examining the mentoring experience among USNA midshipmen via focus groups, this study offers over-arching and underlying mentoring themes, attitudes, and perspectives. This research focuses on USNA graduating classes of 2002 through 2005.

This thesis is limited to examining only male majority (Caucasian) and minority (African-American) midshipmen. Female midshipmen were not queried in this study. The additional limitations of this research are the following: (1) The definition of mentoring varies from study to study and a stronger meaning of mentoring is found in studies where subjects are interviewed in-depth rather than questioned as a group (Merriam, 1993); (2) Because of the small number of minority participants available at the institution, it was necessary to “over-sample” African-American midshipmen males relative to Caucasian midshipmen males; (3) The maximum duration for midshipmen mentoring relationships at USNA is less than four years.

This study operates from the following assumptions: (1) Mentoring relationships are personal relationships between two people of differing experience and age levels; (2) The more experienced and knowledgeable person in the relationship acts as the mentor providing a role model, coaching, guidance, counseling, advice, and other means of both psycho-social and career-oriented means of support; (3) Each participant in the focus group answered truthfully and without mental or emotional restraint; (4) Personal mood variations cannot be accounted for, so answers to questions involving feelings and emotions accurately reflect the respondents’ true feelings and emotions with little influence from the environment.

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## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **A. THE CONCEPT OF MENTORING**

The term mentor invokes such images as: teacher, coach, role model, and guide. Typically, mentoring concerns the relationship between a more experienced and informed and a less experienced and informed person. Mentoring has been explored as a human resource development tool in various settings, most notably in business. This thesis uses examples from the business sector because the mid-level managers within these organizations are the closest equivalent to the officer corps (Buhler, 1998). This chapter provides the reader with a general understanding of mentoring and provides background and information concerning African-Americans and the mentoring experience.

The Naval Academy has been characterized as being one of the largest leadership laboratories in the country because it allows midshipmen to try various leadership styles and qualities to find the style that suits them best. At this institution, these young leaders learn the traits of followership and the qualities of leadership in a four-year period. Mistakes can be made with little consequence. During this four-year period, young men and women from various backgrounds are morally, mentally, and physically challenged. Instructors, educators, officers, and senior enlisted advisors must rely on their training and experiences to impart the seeds of leadership before these young men and women enter the Fleet. Mentoring plays a key role in molding these young people into combat-ready officers and leaders.

The relationship between the mentor and the protégé is important to the mentoring process. Zey (1984) stated that the mentor's visibility to the protégé is critical. Mentoring has often been compared with coaching (Collie, 1998). In the business community, senior executives use coaching to develop and foster communication, and interpersonal and managerial skills in junior executives. Cooperation and collaboration between mentor and protégé is necessary to realize individual and organizational development. Although the benefits to the protégé have received focus, the mentoring relationship has additional effects.

## **B. THE FOUR PHASES OF MENTORING**

A leading expert in the realm of mentoring, Kram (1983) describes the mentoring experience as consisting of two main components. The first component, career functions, concerns sponsorship of the protégé and coaching with regard to organizational rules, norms, and regulations. The second component of mentoring is meeting the psycho-social requirements or needs of the protégé. Mentors provide professional support and enhance the protégé's business image and sense of competence. There are distinct differences in the skill and knowledge levels within the relationship (Phillips-Jones, 1982). The mentor serves a role model for the protégé to emulate. Additionally, once this relationship is established, mentors serve to improve the position, status, training and career options of the "mentoree" (Phillips-Jones, 1982).

Kram (1983) describes the mentoring relationship as a four-phase developmental process. The first of these phases is the initiation phase as the protégé's career begins. The duration of this initial phase is typically six months to a year. Objectives for the relationship, for both parties, begin to form and solidify. The senior in the relationship provides coaching, visibility, and exposure for the junior. Great respect for the senior's ability, specialized assistance, and a keen desire to learn from the senior is what the junior brings to the relationship.

The second developmental phase in the mentoring relationship is the cultivation phase when the mentor and protégé deepen their relationship by getting to know each other and finding out about each other. Both parties benefit from the relationship as emotional bonds begin to form. This period usually lasts anywhere from two to five years into the relationship.

Separation is the third stage. In separation, the nature of the relationship changes as organizational and structural factors (e.g., career progression of one or both parties) begin impinging on the relationship. As the protégé grows, the mentor may fail to meet further career and psycho-social needs. Additionally, the maturation of the protégé may even lead to autonomy and independence. The timeframe for separation is estimated at six months after an emotional event or some significant organizational change takes place in the relationship.



The redefinition phase is the final phase of development when the relationship evolves and transforms or ends altogether. The mentor has passed on his or her skills and opened up a world of opportunities for the protégé. The protégé sees the senior now as a peer; thus changing the very nature of the relationship. The literature supports Kram's two primary functions of mentoring. Phillips-Jones (1982) found that mentors play a focal role in familiarizing protégés with the norms and nuances of an organization. Mentors can also provide protégés with a 'big picture' perspective of the organization. Mentors can be active sounding boards for career decisions and professional goal-setting. Buhler (1998) found that mentors provide protégés with the perspective necessary for setting objective and ambitious goals. Mentors provide protégés with the ability to envision themselves 10 to 20 years out, giving them needed perspective on how best to achieve their goals and desires. Additionally, mentors assist protégés with improving their managerial skills and increasing their knowledge set within an organization.

Kram (1983) also describes four misconceptions associated with the mentoring relationship. The first misconception involves the view of the protégé as the sole beneficiary in the mentoring relationship. The second misconception concerns the popularly held belief that mentoring relationships are positive for both parties; the mentor and protégé. Negative experiences can emerge from mentoring relationships. Kram's third misconception centers on the belief that mentoring relationships are readily available for those who want them. The misperception Kram mentions here can have a direct impact upon the mentoring relationship involving minorities and women. This topic will be discussed later in the chapter. The final misconception is based on the belief that finding a mentor is a key factor to career advancement and personal growth. Although research indicates that mentoring can make a significant difference, mentoring relationships do not always lead to career advancement and personal growth.

### **C. FORMAL AND INFORMAL MENTORING**

One of the main benefits of the mentoring relationship is the perceived positive effect upon employees in an organization. Employees involved in mentoring relationships tend to feel more integrated within the company. The information shared within this mentoring paradigm allows information integral to organizational success to be shared

with personnel. Personnel sharing in this information have a much better chance at being successful in the company and being promoted. This increased socialization amongst employees helps improve both efficiency and productivity for the organization (Zey, 1984). Mentoring in the business setting has been informal and unarranged by the organization (Collie, 1998). Usually when these relationships materialize it is of an ad hoc nature and based on opportunity. The organization does not recognize nor manage these relationships (Chao & Walz, 1992). The individuals involved in the relationship manage the bond themselves with little support from the organization.

More formal mentoring relationships provide the mentor and protégé with very little choice, latitude, or flexibility in forming the union (Chao & Walz, 1992). These forced links usually result in strained relations between the mentor and protégé. In fact, research confirms that there is a longer adjustment period in a formal mentoring relationship than in informal relationships (Chao & Walz, 1992). Additionally, appointed mentors may not perceive their assigned protégés as worthy of the special support and attention. Since the protégé was not of their own choosing, the mentor may not be willing to divulge the information necessary to make the protégé successful in the organization.

#### **D. MINORITIES AND MENTORING**

Women and people of color have traditionally been disadvantaged in the realm of mentoring because of the inability to find effective and willing mentors. This disadvantage may stem from the psychological occurrence of interpersonal attraction in which people are most attracted to people who resemble themselves (Carli, Ganley, & Pierce-Otay, 1991). A major portion of executives and naval officers in America are Caucasian males. This would indicate that Caucasian males would have a greater advantage in establishing a mentoring relationship.

Three important racial characteristics were investigated in the Thomas (1990) study of cross-racial mentoring relationships. First, the researchers found that Caucasian protégés rarely had cross-race mentors. Second, African-American protégés engaged in cross-racial mentoring relationships more often than Caucasian males. Lastly, the study found that same-race mentoring relationships offered much greater psycho-social support than did the cross-racial mentoring relationships. There is a propensity for each racial

group to identify more with and extend greater trusts to members of its own group than members of another racial group (Reid, 1994).

We see the effects of same race mentoring again in a study by Atkinson and Grant-Thompson (1997) where mentor ethnicity, mentor cultural sensitivity, and student level of cultural mistrust all play a role in how African American male students perceive a faculty mentor. Levels of trust were greater for African-American students when presented with a same race scenario. For the protégé to feel comfortable in the mentoring situation, issues like cultural sensitivity and trust should be considered. This example illustrates how a protégé's performance can be affected in a mentoring relationship.

Another study (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Surman, 1990) found that African-American managers felt less accepted, perceived themselves as having less direction, and were generally less satisfied than their Caucasian counterparts in the business world. Additionally, the African-American managers in the study were professionally affected as well. Managers reported that they received lower evaluation marks and reached earlier career plateaus than Caucasian managers.

This trend can also be seen in academic realm. A study by Laird (1994) found that only 32 % of African-American students are graduating from large American universities and colleges. This is in contrast to the 56 % of Caucasian students who are graduating from the same. Many African-American students may harbor very unreal perceptions of success in college. Test scores and high school grades are not always indicative of academic success in college. Many cultural intangibles come into play when African-American students begin attending pre-dominantly Caucasian universities (Rowser, 1997).

## **E. PEER MENTORING**

A fairly new trend appearing in the world of mentoring is peer mentoring. Traditionally the mentoring relationship comprises the mentor (knowledgeable and experienced senior) and the protégé (less knowledgeable and inexperienced junior seeking wisdom). Peer mentoring or co-mentoring can be described as a relationship wherein two like-minded persons engage in a mentorship that is mutually beneficial

towards both parties. Instead of relying on the senior to pass on information, both parties bring certain strengths and weaknesses to the table (Rymer, 2001).

The issue of peer mentoring was also discussed briefly by Kram when she discovered that protégées often have multiple mentors as resources. One of these resources also included peers (2001, 1985).

### **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **A. INTRODUCTION**

At the U.S. Naval Academy, much is expected of midshipmen. The midshipmen of the Brigade can be characterized as motivated, intelligent, and focused individuals who are developing leadership qualities for the Navy and Marine Corps. In addition to academic performance, they are evaluated with regard to athletic, extracurricular, and professional military performance. In light of the constellation of demands placed upon them, the mentoring needs and experiences of midshipmen are an important topic of inquiry. Toward this end, the present thesis explores this area; examining to whom midshipmen look for guidance and what midshipman expect to gain from the mentoring experience.

#### **B. STUDY DESCRIPTION**

A previous study conducted at the Naval Academy concerned “who” midshipmen saw as mentors and the qualities midshipmen thought mentors should have. In response to survey items, midshipmen rated attributes and characteristics of mentors. The present thesis attempts to extend the accumulated knowledge regarding mentoring at USNA. A more in-depth look at mentoring is attempted through focus groups with midshipmen at various stages of their USNA education.

#### **C. PARTICIPANTS**

The participants in this study were chosen from the student body of the United States Naval Academy. The entire Brigade of Midshipmen, year groups 2002 through 2005, provided the sampling frame for the study. Midshipmen were grouped into sessions based on year group and race (minority-African American, majority-Caucasian): Fourth Class (4/C), Third Class (3/C), and Upperclass (1/C & 2/C) with two groups per focus group category (see Table 2). Midshipmen were randomly assigned to focus groups through USNA Institutional Research. First and second class midshipmen were merged into one group defined as Upperclass. The merger of the two groups was based on the similarities between both year groups. The similarities between the classes, 2/C and 1/C

midshipmen are based on the positions of leadership that they are often assigned within the Brigade of Midshipmen. Upperclass midshipmen compose the ranks of company and regimental staff and are generally entrusted with positions of greater responsibility than 3/C and 4/C midshipmen who are still in the process of learning followership.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 2**

<b>Focus Group Methodology Strata Table</b>			
	<i>4/C Midshipmen</i>	<i>3/C Midshipmen</i>	<i>Upperclass (1/C &amp; 2/C Midshipmen)</i>
<b>Majority</b>	2 groups	2 groups	2 groups
<b>Minority</b>	2 groups	2 groups	2 groups

**Note: Eight midshipmen participants were scheduled per session.**

Midshipmen participation was voluntary. The logistics of focus group participation were coordinated between Institutional Research and the USNA Brigade Operations Staff. The focus groups were scheduled for weekend sessions mostly, usually Saturday mornings, during the months of February and March 2002. This schedule was the least intrusive to the midshipmen's academic, athletic, and social schedules.

The first step in determining midshipmen interest in the study was derived through initial e-mail contact. Within the e-mail, the objectives of the study were explained and the concept of mentoring was described and emphasized. From the pool of available participants, midshipmen indicating interest in the study were selected. Names and social security numbers were given to the researcher the day before conducting the focus groups. Additionally a reminder e-mail was sent to all potential participants the day before the focus groups to thank them in advance for participating and to emphasize location, times, and the focus of the study.

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Glenn Gottschalk, head of USNA Institutional Research, was consulted on this merger to confirm the similarities between the two classes.

#### **D. DESCRIPTION OF PROTOCOL**

A semi-structured protocol was developed for the focus groups. Based on Kram's (1984) identification of two basic mentoring functions: psycho-social support and career-oriented needs (Appendix A), these concepts formed the basis of the questions posed. Additionally, the protocol explored the potential effect of mentoring on military retention past initial obligation requirements. The duration of each focus group session was approximately one hour (range 45 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes).

#### **E. DESCRIPTION OF QUESTIONNAIRE**

In addition to responding to the focus group protocol, the participants were asked to fill out a short questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to elicit information regarding team affiliation, academic major, and potential for retention. This questionnaire was administered after the focus group session had concluded. The participants were given a 5-10-minute segment of time, within the hour session, to complete the survey. The one-page questionnaire included academic and extra-curricular related questions. Background and demographic information was also requested from each participant and a "comments" section was provided for participants who wanted to make any last statements concerning mentoring (Appendix B).

#### **F. POTENTIAL BIASES**

Convenience samples were drawn for focus group participation. Midshipman participation was not mandatory for the study. Volunteers were solicited from midshipmen present for weekend duty on the grounds to minimize disruption of the midshipmen's schedule while conducting research. Another deviation from random sampling is the over-representation of minority male midshipmen relative to the population at USNA.

#### **G. FOCUS GROUP PROCEDURE**

Potential participants were contacted via e-mail the day prior to conducting the focus groups to confirm location and times. The site for the study was located on Naval Academy grounds. Participants were briefed prior to engaging in the interviews.

First, the focus of the study was stated to all participants. Participants were then briefed on the guidelines and rules governing interaction in a focus group. The definition of mentoring was presented so each participant understood the nature of the questions being asked. Participants were told that all responses and comments would be tape-recorded (audio only). Additionally, they were told that the researcher would be taking notes occasionally throughout the session. Midshipmen were assured that their comments and opinions would remain confidential and that they would not be individually identified with any comments made. The oath of confidentiality between the researcher and the participants was communicated in a verbal manner.

A poster-board stating the rules and the guidelines was posted in plain view of all participants and used to brief the group. An erase board was also posted, just opposite of the poster-board, explaining the definition of mentoring in this study. This prop was also used in the briefing. Participants were given the option of showing up in athletic gear or the uniform of the day. Refreshments (beverages and snacks) were also available. The location for all portions of the study was Dahlgren Hall, located on the grounds of the Naval Academy (see Table 3). Dahlgren is known as a central meeting place for midshipmen and was close to their berthing spaces within Bancroft Hall. This familiar and relaxed setting was used to also place the participants at ease and to make them feel comfortable while the study was being conducted.

**Table 3**

**Focus Group Session Schedules and Site Location**

<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Location</u>
Feb 9 <sup>th</sup> , 2002	0800-1200	USNA grounds, Dahlgren Hall, Fremd Room
Feb 23 <sup>rd</sup> , 2002	0800-1200	USNA grounds, Dahlgren Hall, Fremd Room
Mar 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 2002	0800-1200	USNA grounds, Dahlgren Hall, Fremd Room
Mar 4 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup> , 2002	1900-2200	USNA grounds, Dahlgren Hall, Religious studies room

Mentoring was generally defined for the participants in the study. While many of the midshipmen involved may be familiar with mentoring, many of them may not have understood the meaning of the term for this study. Mentoring was defined as the



following: The relationship between an usually older, experienced and knowledgeable person with a usually younger, less experienced, and less informed person to pass on and transfer knowledge, wisdom, life lessons, etc. Defining the term helped to level out everyone's understanding of the term and give everyone a general idea of the direction of the study.

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## **IV. ANALYSIS**

### **A. OVERVIEW**

Over 50 Midshipmen participated in this mentoring study to produce over 20 hours of recorded audio testimony from the focus groups sessions. Notes were taken during each session to document any major ideas or concepts mentioned during the sessions. The data collected from both minority and majority midshipmen contain the thoughts, perceptions, feelings and views mentioned during the focus group sessions. Data analysis yielded four very prominent themes from the focus groups conducted. Quotes are further defined by ethnicity and class beneath each quotation to specify the focus group.

Each theme is presented with a corresponding and supporting justification statement. Each justification is reinforced with direct quotations from minority and majority midshipmen. N-Vivo software was used to specify and identify the trends found amongst each class of midshipmen.

### **B. THEME #1: MIDSHIPMEN ARE PRIMARILY INFLUENCED BY PARENTS, RELATIVES AND ACTIVE/RETIRED MILITARY TO ATTEND THE NAVAL ACADEMY**

#### **1. Theme**

The first step in this part of the investigation of mentors involves finding out who influenced these midshipmen to attend the Naval Academy. This will provide valuable information about who these young people looked to early in their lives before they became midshipmen. This will offer a perspective to contrast later in this study upon examination of who currently acts as a strong influence in their lives.

#### **2. Justification**

In answering the first question of the focus group protocol, ‘Who, if anyone, influenced you to come to the Naval Academy?’ respondents stated the following people or institutions influenced their decision to attend this institution: parents, relatives, active duty and retired military, high school teachers, ROTC instructors, church members, Blue

and Gold officers (BGO's), service recruiters, and friends. Both majority and minority midshipmen mentioned parents, company officers (CO's), USNA instructors, senior enlisted leaders (SEL's), and active duty and retired military members as mentoring influences in their lives.

During the sessions, when asked who influenced you to come to the Naval Academy, two core groups of influencers emerged. During each session both of these groups were mentioned as influencers in attending the Naval Academy. Group 1 comprised parents, relatives, active duty and retired military, and high school teachers. Group 2 comprised ROTC instructors, church members, Blue and Gold officers, and service recruiters. Group 2 appears to be comprised of a more diversified and varied selection of influencers. Both Group 1 and 2 were based on the amount of times the focus groups mentioned these groups as positive influencers in their decision to attend the Naval Academy. The following quotes exemplify Group 1 influencers.

My father was the main influence for me coming here. I hadn't really considered the Naval Academy until that point. He was the spark for the fire because I had my sights on going to a mainstream university, you know? Since he brought it up I thought I'd give it a try.

(Majority, Upperclassmen)

My high school Tennis coach was a good friend who helped me get here. He approached me after practice and asked if I could take some time to talk with him about it. He was great. He let me talk with him and bounce around ideas. In fact, I'd have to say that he provided a lot of emotional support. He even wrote a recommendation for me and helped me with my SAT preps. My mom was great too. It was nice just knowing she was in my corner.

(Majority, Upperclassmen)

Yeah, my father was prior Navy. He spoke well of the experience. My dad thought it was a good opportunity. He said it would give me a better appreciation for things in my life I take for granted.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

My parents were my first exposure to the Academy. I mean I really didn't get a lot of 'heads up' info about it. A lot of my first impressions were based on a visit during high school. My parents did really 'push' the Academy, but they just kind of said that it's an option if I wanted.

(Minority, Upperclassmen)

Parental support had the biggest impact on why I came. My parents were behind it all the way. I spoke with the rest of my relatives also about my decision.

(Minority, Upperclassmen)

Both majority and minority midshipmen mentioned both sets as influencers in their decision to attend the Naval Academy. Majority students primarily mentioned Group 1 influencers as the strongest persuader to attend the Naval Academy. There was a much smaller occurrence of Group 2 being mentioned by majority midshipmen. With the minority midshipmen focus groups, there was a much larger occurrence of Group 2 influencers being mentioned. Minority midshipmen mentioned both groups during the focus group interviews, but Group 2 had a much stronger presence with minority midshipmen because it was mentioned much more frequently than with the majority midshipmen. The following quotes pertain:

The guy who was most pivotal in my decision was the Chief at my JROTC Unit. I mean, I had heard some things about the Naval Academy, but nothing specific. My parents were against it from the start. The Chief helped to keep pushing it [Naval Academy] though.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

The LTCOL from my JROTC Unit was a Blue & Gold officer who helped to recruit in the area. He brought up the idea and I ran with it.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

A lot of the retired officers from my church helped to set up a trip to Annapolis for a bunch of us who were interested in the Naval Academy. They coordinated with our Congressman to get things rolling.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

JROTC was the biggest contributor for me. Many of the guys there gave a lot of their time to the students who mentioned an interest in the Naval Academy. They really dedicated a lot of their time to us. They wrote recommendations and also helped with exposure.

(Minority, Upperclassmen)

One is led to believe the following. Majority midshipmen seem to rely on a more restrictive pool of resources. It appears as if majority midshipmen tend to rely on the word of their parents and relatives to a great extent. This leads me to believe that the minority midshipmen had a more diversified pool of resources available.

**C. THEME #2: FIRST CLASS (1/C) MIDSHIPMEN ARE THE STRONGEST MENTORING INFLUENCE ON OTHER MIDSHIPMEN**

**1. Theme**

Focus groups in each session, regardless of class or ethnicity, mentioned first class midshipmen as the top mentoring influence during their time here at the Naval Academy. This conclusion was based on the testimony provided by each focus group. All focus groups recounted stories involving either a positive or negative situation with an Upperclassman. The midshipmen recounting these stories stated that they walked away from this situation having gained some understanding of how they wanted to either develop or prevent certain leadership qualities from arising in them. Whether the experience was positive or negative, midshipmen stated that they felt 1/C midshipmen made the strongest impact on their lives at USNA.

**2. Justification**

The participants in the study brought up several points concerning the impact of Upperclass midshipmen, specifically first class, and their development. The protocol questions allowed them to naturally come to this conclusion concerning 1/C impact on Underclassmen development at the Naval Academy.

When the subject of 1/C midshipmen was brought up during the session, nearly everyone in the group related a story concerning a positive or negative experience with a 1/C midshipman. Even Upperclass midshipmen related incidents from their past involving 1/C midshipmen. The following accounts are all ascribed to positive personal experiences with first class midshipmen:

If someone's giving me advice, especially if it's my squad leader who I respect very much, I'd be much more likely to follow his advice than someone I don't respect.

(Majority, Upperclassmen)

What makes the difference is someone willing to 'walk the walk, and talk the talk.' I mean anyone can sit there and say this or that. But the guy who's serious is going to get out there and make you believe. Because he wants to do it and wants to be the one getting challenged.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

I really look up to the president of the Gospel Choir. This guy has cracked the code and is getting it right. This kid's a regimental stripper, service selecting Nuke subs, an engineer, and just has this really great attitude. I'd like to be like that someday to show it can be done. This kid is well spoken, always has the best uniform, and is always keeping himself active by staying busy.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

It's really good to see others like yourself in roles of prominence. It gives you hope that one day you can do the same.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

I play intramurals, I'm not a varsity athlete or anything, but I've played two intramurals with one firstie, and I imagine he'd be a pretty goofy guy. I've sat at tables with him, and he walks around the hall, 'swearing a blue streak' and being a character. I went out on the field imagining he'd be a nut; he'd be a 'loose cannon' just like he is in the hall. But, you see that, he is a leader and you can't always judge a book by its cover. He's the one out there playing field ball, the game with all the idiots where people get hurt. He's the one who helps the guy up when he knocks them over. When there's an argument, he's willing to say 'yeah, you guys scored a goal and our team's whining.' He's about the only guy on the team willing to play fair. He's the one who, even though he's kind of goofy and stuff, he puts it in perspective. He says it's a game and you don't need to cheat to win a game because you're out there for fun.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

Throughout the study, midshipmen were very eager to point out that they learned as much, if not more, from negative mentoring relationships with Upperclassmen as

positive. These negative scenarios seem to show Underclassmen the type of midshipmen they do not want to be as they progress at the Naval Academy. Midshipmen are constantly acquiring leadership characteristics and elements that they believe will assist with their development as an officer.

I have to go back to my sports team, in particular, the team captain. He's a first class with three stripes. He could be just team captain but he chose to be a squad leader as well, just because he wants that kind of exposure. He says that anybody who has a question or worry about the team can talk to him about it. Anytime we're trying to recruit or anything. Everybody feels comfortable talking with him. The guy makes good grades, got the service selection he wanted, and I got a ton of respect for him.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

The positive and negative characteristics that Upperclassmen exhibit definitely have an effect on Underclassmen development. These high achieving young people are very smart and extremely critical. Hypocrisy can quickly breed malcontent in their eyes. Midshipmen as well as staff leadership must always be sure to set the example so as not to pose the wrong example for these young minds.

Hypocrisy is probably the worst element any leader can be accused of because the Brigade will lose its motivation and cease to care. Hypocrisy can lead to lethargy, dissent, and an all-around bad attitude with the midshipmen of the Brigade. When this occurs, these small factions of bad attitudes can spread like an infection throughout the Brigade.

Because if I see some upperclass that I respect who handles himself well and is just a good midshipman, I'd be much more likely to follow his advice than say someone who gets no respect...a 'bag' who doesn't care.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

I don't look for role-models or examples, to be honest. I feel like there are positive and negative examples all over the Yard. No role models, but instances here and there; actions here and there that are motivating. I just use both positive and negative examples to add to my 'leadership toolbelt.' Specific items I want to emulate, I keep. The definite 'don't's' I keep also, so I don't make the mistake of committing one day.

(Minority, Underclassmen)



After reading these accounts of various positive and negative interactions with upperclass midshipmen, a transition can be seen taking place. As mentioned earlier, parents, relatives, and friends seemed to be the strongest source of influence in their lives. This influence was so strong that it acted as the primary motivator or impetus for these young people to search out and apply to the Naval Academy.

The primary influence has now shifted from their parents, relatives, and friends to basically their fellow classmates. The midshipmen at the Naval Academy seem to rely on each other for the development of their Underclassmen. Peer mentorship seems to be taking place year after year as young Plebes and third class midshipmen are taken under the watchful eye of the upperclass midshipmen who will essentially teach them everything they need to know to be successful.

As the midshipmen mature and begin understanding what it means to be a part of the Brigade of Midshipmen at USNA, the ties forged early on with parents, relatives, and friends begin to weaken as midshipmen immerse themselves in the Naval Academy culture. Personal questions usually reserved for parents and family are now being posed to Upperclassmen. The shared experiences that these young people endure in the classroom, on the athletic fields of competition, and in the military environment forge bonds that can last a lifetime. I am by no means trying to insinuate that midshipmen lose all contact with family. I am merely pointing out that there is a dramatic shift that takes place as midshipmen become part of the Naval Academy family. They begin looking for solace within their “military family.”

**D. THEME # 3: MIDSHIPMEN SEEM TO HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF SKEPTICISM WITH THE CHAIN OF COMMAND**

**1. Theme**

Minority and majority midshipmen stated that they are constantly cognizant of who they trust and share information with. Company officers, senior enlisted leaders, and instructors are generally viewed as a midshipman resource. But, this resource at times

goes unused due to midshipmen perceptions associated with sharing personal information. There appears to be some reticence on the part of midshipmen to trust others outside of the midshipman realm or circle. Midshipmen may sometimes feel that the information they share with staff and faculty may place them (the midshipman) in a bad position due to what the staff or faculty person may think of them. Also some midshipmen feel that the information shared may somehow be used against them at some point through conduct action. The nature of the information shared could possibly place the faculty or staff representative in apposition where they have to inform someone or take action.

## **2. Justification**

The willingness of midshipmen to seek out help and utilize Naval Academy resources is hampered because of their lack of understanding and interaction with faculty and staff. Their sense of faith and trust within the chain of command could be stronger. This weak trust in the leadership affects the way they establish relationships and makes them hesitant to actually seek out help or assistance from the staff. Midshipmen willingly admit that company officers, senior enlisted, officer and enlisted instructors, coaches, and staff personnel have much experience and knowledge to offer. Unfortunately, these resources are too often viewed or perceive as being outside their circle of trust with their fellow midshipmen.

At the same time the professors are outside of the system. I think a lot of times, firsties, especially have a good perspective on things. Because they've been mids and they've been through the whole system.

(Majority, Underclassmen )

This hesitance to share information with staff and faculty may exist because midshipmen feel they may open themselves up to reprisal by sharing personal information. This can be seen specifically in the relationship between midshipmen and company officers and senior enlisted. Staff and faculty have to be open and approachable while also acting as the standard keepers holding midshipmen accountable to USNA policies and standards.

At times midshipmen may not feel comfortable going to other midshipmen. This may be the case when midshipmen are part of the chain of command within a company. The midshipman on staff deals directly with the company officer and senior enlisted. Because of this relationship, other midshipmen within the company may not feel totally comfortable approaching other midshipmen with their problems or issues. The following statements may help to clarify:

I think when I have a question, I try to figure out where do their loyalties lie. That's the first thing I learned over the summer. I'm loyal to these 39 people that are in my company.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

Unless you have a really good relationship with a particular first or second class, when you go to an upperclass for advice and you ask the question, 'what should I do here?' you always risk getting the response of 'why don't you find out and report back!' Some first class in my company I feel comfortable asking about some things, but there are just some things that they feel that they had to find out as plebes, so they expect you to go find it out for yourself. You always gotta be careful who you ask a question.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

Regrettably, midshipmen at times fail to recognize that both faculty and staff have an obligation to uphold the standards set by the institution. This may be where the cynicism and mistrust starts to build and develop. In the midshipman's frame of reference, when personal information is shared in confidence, they feel it should not be held up for scrutiny. For the staff and faculty who are obliged to uphold institutional standards, this is not the case. Everything is used in the equation for evaluation.

Many of the officers and enlisted personnel deal with personal information shared by midshipmen in different ways. The degree of severity of the information shared (alcoholism, underage drinking, sexual misconduct, unauthorized absence, etc) will determine the reaction of that senior enlisted or officer in that situation.

If he's the company commander, he's got to be loyal to the company officer and senior enlisted and see what they think. He's got to represent them.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

Whenever I ask a question I'm thinking, if I ask this firstie, who is he loyal to and how does it affect his answer? I figure he's probably [loyal] to his group of classmates.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

This leaves the midshipman in a very awkward situation. When this personal information is shared, they feel like they are going to a friend or confidant who will not 'rat them out' or divulge information they considered to be secret. The result is a feeling of betrayal and ill-will toward that staff or faculty member who 'bilged a shipmate.' The staff member is put into an awkward situation similarly due to the fact that they must take action on these items or fail to uphold the institution's policies and guidelines.

So, I can usually tell or get an idea of what type of response I'll get by whom I'm going to ask. If I ever have any kind of doubt with who I'm going to ask, I'll just look at someone's face, usually, the mood there will tell me if I should ask the question. If it's a serious question, is the guy "cracking up?" Are you insulting him with something stupid?

(Majority, Underclassmen)

I figure I'll just dismiss the question and find someone who's a little more loyal, more understanding to my viewpoint, my perspective.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

Midshipmen are held accountable using the Conduct System. The Conduct System comprises both major and minor offenses for which midshipmen can be held responsible. This punishment system will assign demerits and also restriction of privileges, leave, and liberty, to name a few. When midshipmen are brought up on offenses due to the type of information they share, it sometimes breeds cynicism and mistrust. They do not understand the higher obligation the staff has to uphold standards and policies in situations where midshipmen share personal accounts where they have broken the rules or undermined the standards of the institution.

**E. THEME # 4: BOTH MAJORITY AND MINORITY MIDSHIPMEN ESTABLISH MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS TO ACQUIRE VERY SPECIFIC INFORMATION**

**1. Theme**

Midshipmen are highly intelligent high-performing young people. But, even the best midshipman requires direction and guidance. They receive this guidance in various ways through various channels. Many midshipmen stated that they are looking to establish mentoring relationships to meet very discrete and specific criteria. Midshipmen stated that they look for very discrete things in the relationships they build with the staff and faculty. Normally, in a true mentoring situation, a relationship is established between a protégé and a mentor. This relationship, once established, can last for numerous years as the duo progress and proceed through each mentoring phase.

**2. Justification**

There are various resources that midshipmen have at their disposal for advice, guidance, and instruction. Many junior officer instructors return to the Naval Academy after anywhere from 3-6 years of active duty in the operational fleet. When they rotate to a shore-based position, they have some years of experience to offer as recommendations, suggestions, and advice to the Brigade. For senior enlisted faculty, active duty time can range anywhere from 8-20 years of sea time. Senior officer personnel can have anywhere from 12-20 years of experience as an officer to offer as wisdom. All can be considered very valuable sources of information.

With so many resources available, midshipmen are very particular about who they seek out for advice. This is predicated on your assigned position to the Naval Academy. Midshipmen will approach the resource they believe can best provide answers to their questions. Again, any assistance or help outside the midshipmen population is questioned due to trust issues. Midshipmen have the perception that asking the wrong questions can ‘paint’ an inaccurate and erroneous picture of them in the eyes of the midshipman’s superiors. The following statements are offered as examples of these perceived notions:

I have a different opinion, if I go somewhere for advice on Academy issues and Academy-related things, I go with who I think is the most

experienced people on the Yard, the professors in the academic department. They've been here longer than any midshipmen and they've seen a lot more than we have. I think they probably have the best advice to give in any case really. Unless it has something to do with something they completely wouldn't know about, say in the Hall or things like that. Unless it's an old Academy grad, they'd probably have a little more advice to give. Sometimes I'll go to them.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

The Naval Academy is a four-year institution for the Midshipmen of the Brigade. Officer and enlisted staff and faculty are attached to the command for a standard two-year tour of duty. Within this two-year timeframe, officers and enlisted alike will have various interactions with the Brigade. It usually takes a year to two years for midshipmen to build up a relationship with their chain of command.

I can see, in certain situations, where going to faculty members or a coach, or somebody who's been around for a long time here might be helpful, but at the same time they still don't really know what it's like to be a midshipman.

(Majority, Underclassmen)

The midshipmen will spend a good deal of time feeling out their chain of command and observing how different situations are handled by that officer or senior enlisted. The reaction to the situation will be observed and evaluated by the midshipman. The way the staff member reacts will have a great deal of significance because this determines the midshipmen's comfort level with sharing any information.

Some professors are just, you know, best left alone. It's hard to approach them because they don't even understand what you're asking. Instead of wasting my time, I'll just go to MGSP or get up with some other kids in my class. Make a study group where we help each other.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

With these elements in mind, one can see how it can be very difficult to establish rapport with midshipmen when there is a 'revolving door' of staff and faculty entering and exiting the institution. According to focus group accounts, midshipmen are quite

skeptical of approaching staff and faculty for fear of reprisal from the information shared or the imprecise image that can be formulated.

## **F. THEME # 5: MINORITY MIDSHIPMAN USE A SYSTEM OF NETWORKS FOR SUPPORT**

### **1. Theme**

During each of the sessions, the interviewees made it clear that minority and majority midshipmen are looking for much of the same things in mentoring experiences and from mentors as a whole. As stated earlier, midshipmen do not consult only one or two individuals as mentors per se, but they consult a wide circle of support structures (parents, relatives, friends, retired military personnel, teachers, faculty, staff, etc) for advice. Of all of these resources, the strongest element for support, learning, and mentoring are the Upperclassmen (3/C through 1/C midshipmen). Predominantly, 1/C midshipmen were mentioned throughout the sessions due to their understanding of the Naval Academy and their proven ability to successfully navigate to their 1/C year as a senior. The biggest resource they are searched out for is their experiences. Questions like which major should I declare, which instructor is the best for advanced chemistry, and what should I do in this situation.

### **2. Justification**

Again, midshipmen feel more comfortable approaching each other for advice, suggestions or recommendations vice approaching someone on the faculty or staff at USNA. Midshipmen tend to have extremely strong bonds between one another due to the shared USNA experience. While support is available in various different forms, the support midshipmen tend to accept comes from other midshipmen; especially advice offered from Upperclassmen. Midshipmen are slow to except anyone else outside the midshipmen realm into their circle of trust.

I just don't feel comfortable talking with the instructors here because they just don't get it. Professors have a tendency to have certain stereotypes about midshipmen.

(Minority, Upperclassmen)

They don't understand what it's like to be a varsity athlete midshipman with 21 credit hours who's a System Engineering major. They think just cause you're a varsity athlete that you're going to be lazy in class and not care.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

This circle of trust is especially true for minority students who may feel singled out or isolated due to low numbers of minorities per company. This network establishes a safe-haven where minority midshipmen can feel comfortable asking questions and seeking out information. Whereas majority midshipmen would feel safe asking another company member a question, minority students may reserve these questions for minority students in another company altogether.

For me NAPS helped me adjust to military life at the Academy. It would have been very difficult for me to acclimate without it. I also met some of my best friends down there also. These are the people I trust going to. Since they know me, I can ask the 'Duhh' question without worrying about being labeled as stupid or something.

(Minority, Upperclassmen)

NAPS helped show you what to expect. It just made the adjustment easier. Helped to prioritize and organize things so you don't get behind. Other Napster's are there for you to count on and ask questions even after NAPS is done.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

Minority midshipmen tend to seek out and look for support system networks. The networks generally relied upon are Naval Academy Preparatory School (NAPS), sports teams, and ECA's (Gospel Choir, Midshipmen Black Studies Club, National Society of Black Engineers). These networks offer a wide variety of encouragement and assistance for the minority students USNA experience. Majority students also mentioned ECA's and sports teams as a source of support, but not to the extent that minority midshipmen use these structures for help.



Getting involved with minority clubs has been beneficial. There's someone there who is going to back you up or help you out. It's like being around family again.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

Several of the minority participants attributed their success at the Naval Academy to their experiences in NAPS. This one-year timeframe also allows them to start building support networks. The following excerpt makes the point:

I believe NAPS totally prepared me for the Naval Academy. It was the best thing for me. I had the chance to get a hold of a lot of military related material and grasping the core-concepts they wanted us to know. It was great because my roommates and teammates were right there for me. I knew I could use them or ask them questions because they were a resource.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

For clarification, NAPS is a one year college preparatory program specifically designed for candidates coming to the Naval Academy. In this one year program, candidates are familiarized with the academic, physical, and military rigors and guidelines of the Naval Academy. The one-year timeframe allows the students to adjust to the fast-paced schedule and maintain the time-management skills necessary to be successful.

Sport teams are another fountain of support that minority midshipmen use as a resource. Time with the team conducting drills, practicing, and training builds deep bonds that each player carries with them back to the Hall. However, company participation and visibility is significantly decreased. The decline in participation and visibility at times alienates team athletes from their own company. This tension makes asking for information awkward and tense. Participants indicated that there is a great stigma associated with team athletes because of the time spent out of company area and with the team.

On the football squad I have guys who can relate to me. I know they're going to go all out because that's what happens in practice and games. I feel closer to them than anyone else. I talk with the team coach more often than my squad leader or anyone else in my company.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

I don't know about everyone else, but, you know, the faculty is hard to approach. The biggest factor to overcome with them (faculty, staff, etc) is culture. That's always getting in the way and it makes it real difficult to reach the instructors. They have pre-conceived notions of what a Black midshipman is and they stick to it. It's almost like I have to put on two different faces to survive.

(Minority, Upperclassmen)

On the athletic field, strong bonds are built through the shared experience of challenge and competition. In fact, many midshipmen interviewed admitted feeling stronger ties to midshipmen on their sports team than they did with midshipmen within their chain of command in a squad. Varsity athletes dedicate a great deal of time and energy to their teams. The time spent with those teams establishes highly close-knit relationships where the midshipmen feel safe to share ideas, thoughts and feelings.

The last networking resource minority midshipmen look to for guidance and mentorship is extra-curricular activities (ECA's). The three ECA's of note here are the Gospel Choir, Midshipmen Black Studies Club (MBSC), and the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). The midshipmen have unofficially categorized these three organizations as the "Triad." These three organizations have the highest presence of minority midshipmen. These three organizations have open membership to the entire Brigade of Midshipmen. It is not exclusively for minority midshipmen, but minority students do view these organizations with high regard.

I really enjoyed being exposed to midshipmen of my own race who were being successful. It gave me something to strive for. I really felt as if they could offer me advice to help me get to the same position they are. It's especially true in instances where that kid is a striper [Midshipman LT and above]. He stands for something I hope to achieve, if I get so lucky. It can be done, look he did it!

(Minority, Underclassmen)

Being part of the Triad is rewarding because you get the chance to interact with midshipmen who have (kinda) paved the way. They're here to offer us their experiences and information. It's almost like they're passing us the torch so we can do the same thing.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

What attracts minority students to these organizations most is the fact that they feel very comfortable with the atmosphere of these organizations. In fact, many interviewees stated that there seemed to be a 'family' environment present in these groups. The sense of belongingness and comfort are very strong in these circles. Upperclassmen play a pivotal role in mentoring the underclassmen in these organizations. They are looked up to a great deal because they have shown that minority midshipman can and will be successful here. Their experiences and information act as inspiration for other underclassmen trying to reach their commission.

I think the biggest benefit is having the chance to talk with the older Black officers on the Yard. They have something to offer. They know what it takes to be successful because they're still doing it. I only wish we had more senior African-American officers on the Yard. They really do have something to offer the Black midshipmen here. Being in NSBE affords me the opportunity to, you know, pick their brains and get the 'real deal' on what it's like being a Black officer in the Fleet. No matter how much talkin' you do, this is the Naval Academy, not the Fleet.

(Minority, Upperclassmen)

Black upperclassmen helped to guide us and 'keep on course.' They provided insight into what was up ahead and what we needed to prepare for. I really have to give it to the Gospel Choir Upperclass because they really me by taking me under their wing and talking me through hard times.

(Minority, Underclassmen)

While each person on staff and faculty play a part in guiding and nurturing midshipmen, it is readily apparent that midshipmen have the strongest influence on midshipmen development.

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## **V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS**

### **A. CONCLUSIONS**

The focus groups uncovered some truly revealing discoveries about the midshipmen mentoring experience at the Naval Academy. What was of the utmost interest was the finding that both majority and minority midshipmen are pursuing mentoring relationships both inside and outside of Bancroft Hall. They are inundated with several opportunities to form these relationships.

Minority and majority midshipmen are both looking for mentoring relationships. But the places where they seek out this information are different. Both are looking to establish mentoring relationships. Midshipmen tend to rely on each other for mentorship, particularly between the Upperclassmen and the Underclassmen.

The midshipmen schedule is jam-packed with different activities and goings-on to occupy their time. With this in mind, midshipmen are just cross-pollinated with the chance to interact with each other in all types of different settings. There are over 300 different extra-curricular activities, varsity sports, club sports, and after-class clubs in which the brigade can eagerly engage. With exposure to such diverse and varied groups, midshipmen are offered the prospect to intermingle with each other on a daily basis. With so many options available, midshipmen can build mentoring relationships with almost anyone available on the Yard.

Before these young people go through plebe summer and earn the right to be a midshipman, they still maintain strong bonds with their parents. These bonds slowly begin to dissolve as their attachment and commitment to the Naval Academy and the Brigade strengthens. In fact, as midshipmen are absorbed into the Naval Academy culture, they begin to look to each other for guidance and mentorship. Their parents establish the solid foundation and their peers help to develop what their parents began years before. The Upperclass midshipmen of the Brigade take on the responsibility of acclimating the Underclassmen to the Naval Academy culture, norms, and accepted behaviors.

Minority midshipmen are afforded the chance to cross cultural boundaries by establishing mentoring relationships with others outside of their own ethnicity or race. Unfortunately, with the dearth of minority instructors, faculty, coaches, CO's, and SEL's, the possibility of establishing within culture mentoring relationships can be extremely rare and uncommon. It is imperative for these young people to see other minority personnel holding these myriad positions throughout the stretches of the Naval Academy. Without these symbols of progress and diversity within the strata of the Naval Academy's personnel structure, midshipmen can find themselves stripped of a prime opportunity to interact with someone who can provide sage advice and instruction.

At no time should we make the assumption that like cultures will produce seamless mentoring relationships. Like cultures do not mean like experiences; each of us has our own different upbringing and background. While similar backgrounds and cultures does not imply an automatic relationship to come to fruition, but it can be a resource for some who find the relationship more comfortable with someone of their own culture.

Midshipmen indicated a very clear need or desire for someone to lend advice, provide suggestions, and make recommendations to them. This need for guidance took on the guise of various different forms. Sometimes a favorite instructor may be tapped as an information resource for midshipmen. Maybe a professor who sparked a twinkle of interest in class may be perceived as a 'well of knowledge and experience.' Even the company officer (CO) and senior enlisted leader (SEL) are sometimes, but very rarely, used as sounding boards for recommendations and suggestions.

More often than not, midshipmen who reside in the confines of Bancroft Hall rely on each other to offer up advice and provide direction. For any young midshipmen struggling to find the delicate balance between the institution's athletic, academic, and military rigors, this information pertaining to midshipman survival is invaluable. The Upperclassmen (1/C-seniors and 2/C-juniors) of the Naval Academy can offer information that often leads to the road of success.

It should come as no surprise that those midshipmen who spend so much of their time on Naval Academy grounds and within the confines of Bancroft Hall would turn to

each other in times of need. The close ties they build towards one another are forged in the classrooms of academia, the athletic fields of competition, and on the parade field as they practice their manual of arms. The daily interaction they have with one another build very strong bonds and instill deep roots of both trust and respect for each other. These profound feelings of respect, trust, and confidence midshipmen have for one another facilitate the strong relationships that extend past their four year training experience here into both the military and civilian sectors many years later.

While both the company officer and senior enlisted offer valuable knowledge of the Navy and Marine Corps and have a vast wealth of experience to draw from, midshipmen overall rarely speak with them. Their information base is a tremendous mentoring resource. However, midshipmen rarely feel comfortable speaking with the company officer or senior enlisted concerning such matters. This fear or hesitancy may be the direct or indirect result of various causes. The first item that comes to mind is the age difference which exists between midshipmen and the company leadership. Company officers on average have roughly 10-12 years over the midshipmen in their charge. For SEL's (senior enlisted leaders), the age difference may be anywhere from 10-20 years. While this isn't a drastic gap in age, it can still serve as a barricade to communications. This tentativeness may also be contributed to by the fact that the company officer and senior enlisted leader are the disciplinarians responsible for assigning punishment for indiscretions and infractions that take place within company. As the disciplinarian, midshipmen may feel uncomfortable with extending their trust and confidence to the CO (company officer) or SEL for fear of disciplinary retribution and conduct action.

With this fear of reprisal looming in the back of their minds, midshipmen will not share their thoughts and feelings with the CO and SEL. This is a severe obstruction to the relationship and can prevent the mentoring experience from beginning.

## **B. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Based on the findings here, the next step for this research should be to explore the cross-cultural and cross-gender experiences of the midshipmen mentoring experience at the Naval Academy. This study focused primarily at scratching the surface of the

midshipmen mentoring experience with attention on the dissimilarities between minority and majority midshipmen here. Other studies could explore the mentoring experience purely from the perspective of minority female midshipmen at the Naval Academy. This perspective of the midshipmen mentoring experience deserves attention and would be well-received.

Another potential avenue for research lies in the differences that may possibly exist between various minority midshipmen attending the Naval Academy. This study primarily looked at African-American male midshipmen. There is a great deal of investigative potential in analyzing the potential differences that may lie between African-American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American, and other minority midshipmen in terms of mentoring experiences. In such a study, the true features of the cross-cultural aspect of the midshipmen mentoring experience can be explored and drawn out.

Additionally, a change of methodology would be a fresh perspective to continue with this study. Here we analyzed mentoring experiences using the focus group and probing questions to draw out similarities and differences in mentoring effects. Focus groups allowed us to expand the scope of the study to a wide group of participants and allowed us to study a wider cross-section of the Brigade. Unfortunately, due to time limitations on the study, we did not have time to take a look at the deeper and finer points of the midshipmen mentoring experience.

Conducting individual interviews to investigate the different aspects of mentoring would allow a much more in-depth and far-reaching perspective. Personal interviews would also provide the researcher with a rich and productive element for study. Each personal account given could be examined in detail for over-arching themes or characteristics found in the mentoring relationship. Secondly, a survey might also serve as an option for a more detailed look into mentoring.



# **APPENDIX A: MENTORING FOCUS GROUP SEMI-STRUCTURED PROTOCOL**

## **Mentoring Focus Group Protocol**

### **Introduction**

Good morning/afternoon, my name is Demetrius Wilkins and my assistant researcher is .... I'm glad everyone could make it today. I am a student in the Leadership and development (LEAD) program, which is a Master's program for incoming company officers. I'm exploring the mentoring experiences of midshipmen at the Naval Academy. Today's focus group is designed to allow you to discuss mentoring within a small group atmosphere. Focus groups are small group discussion sessions focusing on a particular topic – in this case, mentoring. The purpose is to gather your experiences, views, and opinions. You don't have to agree but I'd like each of you to express your views.

This session will last for about an hour and will be recorded on tape. Notes will be taken also throughout the session. All the information and data will be used for research. Strict confidentiality will be maintained. Anything said behind these doors will remain confidential.

The focus group results will be used for research and be formally documented in my thesis research. A small questionnaire will be administered at the session's conclusion to provide background data for focus group composition. I encourage everyone to speak your mind and let your ideas be known. I would like for everyone to participate. Your participation in this study may affect the way the Academy conducts mentoring in the years to come, so everyone's input is valuable. Please use the markers provided to write your first names on the placards provided.

The following ground rules and guidelines will be observed throughout our focus group session:

### **Focus Group Guidelines**

**Everyone will respect each other's time to talk**

**Do not talk over one another**

**Everyone should feel free to respond to the questions asked**

**Remain open to the questions being asked**

**Speak loudly and clearly when responding to questions**

Let's begin by having each person get up and introduce himself. Please tell us your name, let us know where you're from, and briefly tell us about yourself.

If no one has any questions concerning the study we will get started with the session. I'll begin by first stating this study's definition of mentoring:

### **Mentoring Definition:**

Mentoring: the relationship between an usually older, experienced and knowledgeable person with a usually younger, less experienced, and less informed person to pass on and transfer knowledge, wisdom, life lessons, etc.

(Definition and focus group rules posted on easel/whiteboard in the lab)

### **Mentor/Protégé Initiation Processes**

- Q1-** Who, if anyone, influenced you to come to the Naval Academy?  
(1) Who was pivotal in assisting you in coming to the Naval Academy?  
(2) How did they help you?  
(3) Can you give me an example?
- Q2-** Has your transition to Naval Academy life been easy or difficult?  
(1) Has anyone assisted you through these periods of transition?  
(2) What did they do to assist you?  
(3) Can you provide an example?
- Q3-** To whom do you go for advice?  
(1) Has anyone acted as a guide or role model for you here?  
(2) How did they help? (i.e. support, exposure, information, role model, coach, etc)

### **Psychosocial and Career-oriented Support Structures**

- Q4-** How have you dealt with the academic pressures placed on you here?  
(1) What strategies have you used to be successful here?  
(2) Did anyone recommend these strategies to you?  
(3) Has anyone helped you through this experience?  
(4) Specifically, how did that person help you?
- Q5-** How have you handled the Naval Academy's military requirements?  
(1) What strategies have you used to be successful here?  
(2) Did anyone recommend these strategies to you?  
(3) Has anyone helped you through this experience?  
(3) Specifically, how did that person help you?

### **Potential Retention**

- Q6-** Do you think your mentoring at the Academy is valuable for later adjustment in the fleet?  
(1) How and in what way?  
(2) Will these experiences influence your decision to stay in the navy/marine corps?



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## APPENDIX B: MENTORING BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

### Background Questionnaire

This survey will take approximately 5-15 minutes. The information in this survey will remain confidential. It will not be used to identify individuals. The results will be used only to report trends. Your sincere responses are needed to help improve mentoring relationships at the Naval Academy. When answering the questions below, PRINT ALL RESPONSES on the lines provided:

1. *What sports team or athletic activities are you involved with at the USNA (i.e. soccer, basketball,*

*etc)?* \_\_\_\_\_

2. *What non-sports related extra-curricular activities are you involved with at the USNA (i.e. debate club, choir, etc)?* \_\_\_\_\_

3. *What is your likely choice for service selection (i.e. navy, surface warfare, marine corps, intelligence, etc)?* \_\_\_\_\_

4. *What is your academic major?* \_\_\_\_\_

5. *Based on your mentoring experiences here at the Academy, would you be willing to act as a mentor for another midshipman? (Please circle one)*      **Yes**                      **No**

*Briefly explain why or why not:* \_\_\_\_\_

6. *Below, please provide any personal comments you would like to make concerning mentoring that you feel were not expressed during the focus group session:*

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